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A Day of Cloakroom and Dagger

The real action on the balanced budget amendment took place behind closed doors. What the galleries got was seven hours of pantomime and a surprise ending.

The dumb show went on all Tuesday afternoon, as members stalked and talked inaudibly. Little clusters of senators formed and dissolved, with the audience none the wiser, duos, trios, quartets. Were they talking about New York Sen. Al D'Amato's startling romance—she's a beauty and doesn't mind that he's married—or about Thomas Jefferson and federalism?

The clerk rattled off 23 amendments, the roll was called repeatedly, and Republican Whip Trent Lott (Miss.) had every inch of the floor covered. His lieutenants were stationed at the doors and at the voting table; others roamed the aisles like bomb-dogs sniffing out waverers.

The spotlight swung from one holdout to the next. Would Democrats Sam Nunn of Georgia, and his sidekick John Breaux (La.), accept the balancers' proffer of assurance that the power of the purse would not be snatched by the courts if congressional hands were tied by the amendment? They would. The needed 67 loomed.

Little heed was paid to Mark Hatfield (Ore.), the lone Republican dissenter. He was hauled in by Majority Leader Bob Dole (Kan.) and talked to, but to no avail. Only the most formal hope had been entertained. Hatfield spent a lonely decade in the Senate protesting the Vietnam War, being snubbed, deplored, ostracized. He probably doesn't notice his solitude any more.

Two prairie Hamlets came front and center. Kent Conrad and Byron Dorgan, a bright pair of Democrats from North Dakota, were having trouble. Of course, they want to balance the budget. Who would not? But everyone not in the grip of the Republican obsession knows that the only cash lying around in the government's bare cupboard is the Social Security trust fund. Republicans have been vague about what they would cut, but they swear they would not lay a finger on Social Security.

Dorgan was on the commission that reformed Social Security in 1983—"One of the few sober things we did in the '80s was to determine the money would not be used to offset other revenues to balance the budget."

The horns of the dilemma were sharply outlined. If it is sacrilege to tamper with the Constitution, tampering with Social Security is totally toxic. A New York

Times poll laid it out graphically. Seventy-nine percent favor a balanced budget. But if it's at the expense of Social Security, the number plummets to 32 percent.

Dorgan decided early in the day that he could not budge, although Lott, Orrin Hatch (Utah) and other balancing zealots still gathered around him, gabbling. But Conrad, who takes himself extremely seriously—he once vowed to leave the Senate if he didn't reduce the deficit—continued to brood. As an oversize card of farewell to Congressional Budget Office Director Robert Reischauer was handed around among the members for their signing, Conrad was plainly torn. The Democratic Caucus almost catapulted him into the arms of the Republicans.

The Democratic Caucus, a weekly lunch ritual held in the gloomy LBJ Room just off the Senate floor, is considered as secret as a lodge meeting but sometimes there is drama too good not to be shared. David Pryor (Ark.), everybody's favorite senator, suggested that if the amendment failed, the Democrats should be ready with a strategy to prove that being against the amendment is not the same as being against a balanced budget—they should come up with judicious cuts. Sen. Fritz Hollings (S.C.) dismissed the notion: Republicans are in charge. Then, it is said, Conrad erupted and said he was sick of all the pushing and shoving and the talk about whose turn it was to go first.

When he came back to the floor, a letter from House Speaker Newt Gingrich was making its way around. It was a new promise to protect Social Security. Conrad strode to the Republican side and sat down with budget guru Pete Domenici (N.M.). Gradually a cluster formed; Paul Simon (Ill.), Bob Dole, the whole high command of the balancers gathered. Aides and tourists moved in. Presently Simon triumphantly bore him off to the GOP cloakroom. After what seemed like an eternity to fuming Democrats, Conrad emerged from the enemy camp. Minority leader Tom Daschle went to reclaim the hostage, marched him off to the Democratic cloakroom. Two Republicans, Robert Bennett (Utah) and Ted Stephens (Alaska) flowered forth in evening attire, cummerbunds and all.

But the mood on their side was no longer festive. Conrad walked over to Dole and told him something that made his face turn bleak. Minutes later, Dole was on his feet giving the day's most startling announcement.

Anti-climax, the Senate speciality, was in effect. The Senate would stand in recess.